



Digital Inclusion in New Zealand

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Abstract

Digital inclusion—having what we need to participate in, contribute to, and succeed in the digital world—is becoming a priority for individuals, groups, and governments around the world. Not having the necessary motivation, access, skills, and trust to engage with all things digital can result in both individuals and groups being digitally excluded. In this Editorial we look at what is encompassed by digital inclusion, who is most likely to be excluded, and the New Zealand government’s recent publication of the *Digital Inclusion Blueprint*. Following this discussion, the papers included in this issue are introduced

Keywords: digital inclusion; digital divide; digital inclusion blueprint

Introduction

In June 2019, the estimate of the world’s population that has access to the internet was just under 59% (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2019). This aggregated figure includes parts of the world where internet access is nearly ubiquitous, such as Europe (88%) and North America (89%), and regions where connectivity is less than 50%—particularly Africa. In the Oceania region, internet penetration is quite low at 69% although Australia (87%) and New Zealand (91%) are comparatively high. These figures demonstrate uneven internet across regions.

If we consider access within New Zealand we find, again, the picture is not consistent. The recently released census information shows that 1.3 of a total of 1.65 million households now have internet access (StatsNZ, 2019). Much of the increase since the 2013 census can be accounted for by population increase during the intervening period, which suggests that the remaining unconnected households may be difficult to reach (Millar, 2019, September 23).

Digital inclusion

Digital inclusion is defined as “all of us have what we need to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from the digital world” (Department of Internal Affairs, 2019a, p. 7). Being digitally included isn’t just a matter of having access to the internet and digital technologies. People also require the digital skills, motivation, and trust to realise the benefits (InternetNZ, 2018). Individuals and groups who do not have ready access to the internet, and/or the digital capabilities necessary to function effectively, are referred to as digitally excluded. The most vulnerable members of society tend to experience more digital exclusion than other members of society. Low socio-economic communities, Māori and Pacific youth, elders, people with disabilities, migrants, refugees with English as a second language, rural communities, ex-offenders, and people with limited education frequently experience barriers to digital access and use (Digital Inclusion Research Group, 2017).

As our environment is increasingly digitised, more highly skilled jobs, which require people with high levels of digital expertise, are being created, while jobs that require minimal digital capabilities are declining. People require a range of digital capabilities, in addition to access, to function successfully in an increasingly digital world. Capabilities include basic digital literacy skills (i.e., skills needed by every citizen to carry out basic online functions such as communicating with others and searching for information), digital skills for the workforce (in addition to the above, workers need these skills to use digital applications that are common in the workplace); and, increasingly, individuals will need skills that are linked to new digital technologies, products, and services (e.g., computer coding, digital marketing, and web design skills).

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Governments around the world are tackling the main reasons for digital exclusion so that people have what they need to be functioning members of digital societies (see, for example Department for Digital Culture Media & Sport, 2017; Digital Inclusion Research Group, 2017; Thomas et al., 2018). In New Zealand's case, the government has recently published the *Digital Inclusion Blueprint* (2019a) which outlines the "vision and context for digital inclusion in New Zealand" (p. 7). Of particular interest to readers of this Journal is recognition of gaps in the current evidence base and prioritisation of research to address those gaps. The digital inclusion research agenda (part of the *Digital Inclusion Blueprint*) outlines the key priorities of the government for digital inclusion research (Department of Internal Affairs, 2019b). Four key components will be used to determine the degree of digital inclusion; namely, motivation, access, skills, and trust (Digital Inclusion Research Group, 2017; InternetNZ, 2018). These components are similar to those used by other countries. Research priorities have been organised into 6 main questions: questions 1 to 3 are considered high priority, questions 4 and 5 are medium priority, and question 6 is low priority.

1. Which groups have a lower likelihood of being digitally included, and why?
 2. How does digital inclusion relate to waiora/wellbeing?
 3. What are Māori aspirations for digital inclusion, what is successful in meeting those aspirations and what opportunities are there to do better?
 4. What works well to improve digital inclusion for different groups?
 5. What is the economic cost-benefit of digital inclusion?
 6. What will we need in future to maintain a digitally inclusive New Zealand?
- (Department of Internal Affairs, 2019b, Key research questions, para. 1)

The first author of this Editorial has been involved in providing feedback on the government's digital inclusion research agenda and continues to have involvement with relevant government departments and other stakeholder groups as the blueprint is actioned. While there is a lot to be done, it is heartening to see the commitment being made to ensure digital equity in New Zealand.

Papers in this issue

The papers in this issue present research into three very different aspects of open, flexible, and distance learning. Barbour and Siko begin by considering recent changes in e-schools in New Zealand in the primary and secondary schooling sectors. The Virtual Learning Network (VLN) has been operating for around 25 years, as "a group of school clusters and organisations who choose to operate as a collaborative network, utilising digital technologies in order to enhance the learning outcomes and opportunities for learners (students, teachers, school communities and educators)" (Virtual Learning Network, n.d.). eLearning clusters had traditionally developed in rural settings but have more recently welcomed an active urban-based eLearning group called

HarbourNet to the Network. This article explores the obstacles HarbourNet overcame to become a successful member of the VLN.

Rowan and Hartnett also provide a New Zealand perspective on a world-wide trend, looking this time at the representation of MOOCs as seen by the public through the New Zealand media. From 2012, the news media in New Zealand has carried items describing MOOCs as being a disruptive influence on existing higher education systems. This exploration of news articles considers this theme of MOOCs as revolutionary and compares New Zealand findings with those of similar overseas research. It also suggests these newspaper articles may shape the way the public views and accepts changes within higher education structures in New Zealand.

The final article, by Vu, Adkins and Henderson, investigates students' perspectives on privacy and data collection in online courses in the U.S. It reports on data from an online survey of U.S. online students, questioning how aware they were of the amount of data being collected on their learning behaviour (such as login frequency, pages viewed or clicked, and learning profiles) and whether or not they were concerned about that data and how it could be viewed or used. The key result is the title of this article, "Aware, but don't really care". The article outlines more than just this key finding—it shows some of the complexities of these issues and students' responses to them.

There should be something of value to readers in this issue. It is an interesting mix of articles, providing both New Zealand and international perspectives on a wide range of trends and issues facing open, flexible, and distance learning. Happy reading!

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